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NOTE OF REALISM IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER

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ABSTRACT

Realism which deals with the presentation of things as they are in reality, has found immense presentation in the works of several poets and playwrights especially from the late 19th century to the present day. These writers are in a sense iconoclasts, who want to bring before man the real picture of life and society in their true hue and colour. For them life is never a bed of roses, in fact, they always intend to focus on the hardships and struggles of common man. The Romanticists have always presented life in a sing-song manner where the protagonist has been shown as a romantic lover, sitting under a tree in the lap of mother nature and playing his flute to the rhythm of light wind. But life for the Realists deals with the hustle and bustle of daily life, the problems and sufferings of common man, his aspirations, hopes, fears, happiness and tears.

This article intends to bring into focus those plays of the English playwright Harold Pinter where realism has been reflected. We will try to confirm the position of Pinter as a realist and how his plays are a true epitome of the present day life.

Key Words: Realism , Theatre of the Absurd, avant-garde, psychological implications, absurd.

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INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter (1930 – 2008) was one of the eminent dramatists of the 20th century. Pinter, born on 10th October 1930 in a lower-middle class family, grew up to become a man of multi-faceted genius. He was not only a playwright, but at the same time a brilliant actor, producer and poet. A number of stage plays, radio plays and television plays are credited to his name. The creative potential of Pinter first came out in the form of poetry at a very tender age of twelve and this talent of Pinter bore fruit for the first time when in the Spring of the year 1947 his poetry was first published in the Hackney Downs School Magazine.

Pinter had started his career as a director quite earlier, but after becoming an associate director of the *National Theatres* in 1973, he began to direct plays more frequently. He directed almost

fifty productions including his own and others' plays for stage, film and television. Some of these include *Otherwise Engaged* (1975), *The Rear Column* (1978), *Close of Play* (1979), *Life Supports* (1997) etc.

Pinter was the author of twenty-nine plays and fifteen dramatic sketches. He has written a novel called *The Dwarfs*. Besides this, he has even compiled two anthologies named *100 Poems by 100 Poets* and *99 Poems in Translation*. Besides this, Pinter was the successful author of 27 screenplays.

Pinter was an 'absurd' playwright whose works are deeply allied to the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. His plays depict the meaninglessness of human life and the absurdity of our existence. They reflect the real situation of man in this modern society and how he everyday fights with his destiny and circumstances, only to make things better and more suitable for him. But at the end of the day he

finds himself helpless and chained in the society. In this article we aim at focusing our attention mainly on those plays of Pinter which present the real position of common man in the society.

Materials and Methods

For the purpose of this article the relevant published material has been taken into consideration. However, focus has been given mainly on those works of Pinter where realism has been given more emphasis. A contrastive methodology has been employed here, besides a deep textual exposition of Pinter's dramas for illustrating our point of view.

Discussion

Harold Pinter was an ardent follower of the 'Absurd School of Drama'. The 'Absurd' or 'New Theatre' movement was originally a Paris based avant-garde phenomenon connected to extremely small theatres in the Quatier Latin. The 'Theatre of the Absurd' (French: Theatre de l' Absurde) is a caption used for particular kind of plays written by a number of primary European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s; it connotes the style of the theatre too which has evolved from their work. It is a term derived from Albert Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), and a clear and lucid thought on the subject of the absurd drama is found in Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). This term is generally applied to a group of dramatists who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes in common towards the predicament of man in the Universe. It was Albert Camus (1913-1960) who first realized the absurdity of human existence during the Second World War and gave a vociferous expression to the meaninglessness of life in his novels and dramas. We may note here the observation of Ram Sewak Singh:

During the Second World War once more the faith of man in civilization was shaken and the chief concern of creative thinkers was the futility of life. Such moments had stirred the soul of man in the past many a time; but this time it was a little different: not only life itself looked absurd but all devices used by man to make life manageable also looked purposeless and ridiculous. The major problem that gazed

straight in the eyes of people now was how to spend time between the two points of life, birth and death.¹

Plays that are categorized under the title 'Absurd Drama' are absurd in the sense that they focus not on logical acts or traditional character development but on human beings trapped in an incomprehensible world. Whatever be the absurd presentation of any situation by the playwrights, but behind these absurdities there is the realistic tone which imparts meaning to the absurd plays. The aim of the Absurd Drama is to enable its viewers to make their own conclusions and decisions. According to Martin Esslin,

The theatre of most previous epochs reflected an accepted moral order, a world whose aims and objectives were clearly present to the minds of all its public, whether it was the audience of the medieval mystery plays with their solidly accepted faith in the Christian world order or the audience of the drama of Ibsen, Shaw, or Hauptmann with their unquestioned belief in evolution and progress. To such audiences, right and wrong were never in doubt, nor did they question the then accepted goals of human endeavour. Our own time, at least in the Western world, wholly lacks such a generally accepted and completely integrated world picture.²

From a very tender age, Pinter had witnessed and experienced the horrors of the Second World War. The appalling condition of the people around him, their unknown terror of death and intrusion, the cry for hunger and other such deadly situations had affected the young mind of Pinter to a great deal. When Pinter later became a playwright, these hidden experiences got expression in his plays, where the common man and his never-ending struggle became the subject matter.

Pinter's first group of plays known as 'Comedy of menace' deals with the themes of loneliness, bewilderment, separation, loss, conflict, an inexplicable or incomprehensible threat, meaninglessness of life and existence, futility of man's efforts, life being comically or tragically

absurd, impossibility of communication between characters in a closed situation, and a kind of decay and morbidity.

In the first and second plays of this group, namely, *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*, Pinter has taken the theme of insecurity of human life. This sense of insecurity looms large in *The Room* which takes place in the humdrum lower-class apartment of a middle-aged woman, Rose. When the young couple Mr. and Mrs. Sands appears before her, claiming they have been told that Rose's room is vacant, Rose's status as the occupant of the room becomes insecure. Rose's position is further questioned by the appearance of the blind Negro, Riley. When Riley enters the room of Bert and Rose, he feels secure and safe while the atmosphere seems to grow insecure for Rose. However, Riley, totally unaware of the forthcoming danger and threat to his life, is beaten mercilessly by Rose's husband Bert. The atmosphere of the room which was earlier cozy for him, becomes hostile.

The Birthday Party also begins with an innocent and normal situation of a man, Stanley Webber, who is boarding in the house of Meg and Petey. Due to some unknown reasons, Stanley spends an oblivious life but the oblivion is broken by two intruders – McCann and Goldberg who bring chaos and insecurity in Stanley's peaceful and lonely life and in the end forcefully take him away with them to an unknown place. This sense of insecurity and threat to life is common in the daily life of modern man, to which he is bound to surrender.

Again man's fear of old age, broken health, old age ailments and loneliness has also got vivid description in Pinter's play *A Slight Ache*. One of the main themes of this play involves one's insecurity about threats to one's self identity embodied in the character of Edward. Edward has a hidden fear inside his heart from the old Matchseller because whenever he sees him, he begins to see his old image inside the Matchseller. He fears his old age and broken health. The deafness, the glass eye and the poor plight of the Matchseller terrifies Edward because he is forced to imagine his own figure in old age.

Through the play *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter wants to convey that everyone is prone to death. No

one is safe in this world. The two hit-men Ben and Gus are waiting for their victim whom they are to kill. They have been paid for the work. But they are unaware of the fact that one of them is the victim. Though Ben and Gus are partners, yet someone has used and employed Ben to kill his own partner – Gus; and this remains a secret with them until the last moment. Gus who, until the last, plays the role of a predator, is at once reduced to the position of a prey –

BEN takes out a comb and combs his hair,
adjusts his jacket,
diminish the bulge of the revolver. The
lavatory flushes off
left. BEN goes quickly to the door, left.
Gus!
The door right opens sharply. BEN turns, his
revolver
levelled at the door.
GUS stumbles in. He is stripped of his
jacket, waistcoat, tie,
holster and revolver.
He stops, body stooping, his arms at his
sides.
He raises his head and looks at BEN.
A long silence.
They stare at each other.
Curtain.³

The author wants to remind us that no matter how much dominant role a person plays in his life, a day will come when he will be dominated by someone else. Every predator has got his own predator before whom he becomes prey and this is the case with every man.

Pinter has also taken the problem of communication as one of the important themes for his plays. Pinter finds that this problem of communication, especially between family members or friends is a vital problem surrounding the modern man. The author has shown through *The Caretaker*, how the lack of communication brings dryness in relationships. Earlier in the play the two brothers – Mick and Aston do not communicate properly with each other as two brothers should. This lack of proper communication widens the gap between them. Although they are brothers, they do not understand each other and are far from each other.

Davies, an old tramp takes advantage of this distance between the brothers and tries to develop enmity between them so that he can secure a better place with the brothers on their individual level. But somehow his tricks are understood by the two brothers and they become united, finally compelling Davies to leave their house.

Sex which is a vital part of human life, has found vivid description in some of the place of Harold Pinter. There are many people for whom sex is insatiable and to quench this thirst, they could go upto any extent; even if it costs their family or married life. This is becoming a common issue with modern man. Same is the case with Ruth in *The Homecoming*, who for the first time comes to her in-laws house with her husband Teddy from America. Some critics believe that this play exposes issues of sex and violence in a highly realistically, yet aesthetically stylized manner. The play indirectly shows the sexual desire of both men and women. Ruth, who is already a married woman with three sons, is still not satisfied and she is so eager to meet her demands that just after returning to her in-law's house for the first time, she tries to get involve in this sexual play with her brother-in-law, Lenny. This sexual desire in other male members of Teddy's family has also remained unfulfilled. There is no other woman in the family after the death of Teddy's mother. So, after the arrival of Ruth in the family, everyone begins to fit her in his personal life in order to fill the vacant place created by the absence of a woman. The play is a direct challenge at the 'morals' in family life.

Pinter in *The Homecoming* has also mocked at the institution of marriage. Being a married woman and after living with her husband for so many years, Ruth readily lets Teddy to leave America alone. Earlier Teddy used to be the nearest person to Ruth whom she knew, loved and wanted the most; but now the same person becomes a stranger, a third person to Ruth, while the two brothers and the father of Teddy become more important persons to her. Now she is all concerned about them and she becomes ready to stay with them. She forgets not only Teddy but also her three sons whom they have left in America. The mother and wife personalities of her character appear lost

and dead in her forever. John Bull has nicely commented on the new position owned by Ruth in the family in the following words:

Consequently, Ruth, like Jessie, is finally enthroned as mother, lover, and whore in response to the men's offer to stay on as concubine and prostitute. Some critics have interpreted the atrocious treatment of Ruth as blatant misogyny, but others argue that this reading is far from the case.⁴

Another common problem especially among the modern youth has been highlighted by Pinter in his play, *A Night Out*. Through the character of Albert, Pinter has focused upon the mental condition of several such unmarried men who are trapped between their duty towards their parents and their heart's desire. Like Albert, these men too become the victim of mental tension and frustration. A sense of humiliation and frustration gets reflected from their social manner. Albert lives alone with his mother and his mother is very possessive towards him. She still considers her son, a kid who is in need of a proper guidance from his mother. She even do not want her son to get closer to any other woman. This nagging and over-possessive nature of Albert's mother is known to his friends and colleagues; and so they always find ways to tease him on this account. In the words of John Bull,

Pinter evokes the world of 1950s psychological entrapment in Albert, the prenatally middle-aged image of his dead father, emotionally coerced by his mother as he attempts to leave for an office party.⁵

There is one more social issue on which the author wants to focus through this play. Pinter reflects on the ill-treatment faced by juniors on account of the scandals and misdeeds of their senior colleagues or boss. The same thing happens with Albert in Mr. King's party where he is falsely accused and ill-treated by his colleagues for misbehaving with one of his lady colleague. Actually Mr. Ryan, whose farewell party is going on, is the real culprit as it is his hand that touched the lady. But as Albert was standing beside her, everyone, even she accuses him. In spite of Albert's repeated insistence, no one trusts him and all misbehaves with him. Same type of situation is common in our society wherein the

juniors have to suffer humiliation for others' misdeeds.

The play *Betrayal*, that belongs to the second group of Pinter's plays called Memory Plays, has been built on an image of human unhappiness and it gives a much more grim and bitter message about human relationships than any other play of Pinter. *Betrayal* portrays a series of betrayals within itself which are connected with one another and they entangle the lives of three persons – Robert (Jerry's friend), Emma (Robert's life) and Jerry (Emma's lover). In this play, the theme of betrayal is multi-textured. Emma and Jerry betray Robert by hiding their love affair from him. Again, Emma betrays Jerry by concealing the fact from him that she had already told Robert about her affair four years ago, whereas Robert betrays Jerry who is his best friend by concealing his knowledge about Jerry's relationship with Emma. Thus, there is betrayal in marriage, love and friendship in this play. To quote John Bull,

On the surface, *Betrayal* appears to be a 1970s comedy of manners concerned with intrigue, betrayal and hypocrisy among the London literati.⁶

Betrayal is said to be a more realistic and humane attempt by Pinter to tackle the problem of marital infidelity in all its psychological implications.

Conclusion

As a corollary to the discussion given and arguments made, and postulates put forward in the above discussion, we may now emphasize with confidence that Harold Pinter is a realist, and an original researcher, who took a vow to bring into focus the actual state of modern man's life. Pinter's attempt was to bring before man, the meaninglessness of his existence in this universe and the absurdity of his life. Pinter's characters are obsessive who may appear to speak and act absurdly but the points at which they arrive, or seem to focus, are not at all absurd. If seen from an acute angle, they appear to reveal one or the other important realities of contemporary life.

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